

Kitchen strainers

Don't let household chores
scrub you the wrong way

by Kathleen Misovic

A sink full of dirty dishes is literally a pain for Marialice Kern.

"I don't have a dishwasher — I have to do dishes the old-fashioned way," said Kern, a resident of Corcord, CA. "I often noticed that my back would get sore after doing a lot of dishes."

Kern is an associate professor of kinesiology — the study of human movement — at San Francisco State University. So it didn't take her long to realize why her back was sore. "I was scrunched over as I was washing the dishes, bending into the sink," she said.

Now when she's faced with a sink full of dishes Kern watches her posture,

making sure her back is straight, her shoulders are back and her elbows are held near her body, rather than jutting out at the her sides. She keeps one knee

bent to relieve the pressure on her back. She often opens the cabinet under the sink and places one foot on the bottom shelf to keep one knee bent.

"When I have all my weight on one leg, it's harder to bend over into the sink," Kern explained.

Once she has the correct posture, Kern focuses on her dishwashing method. She brings the plate or cup up to her to wash it, instead of bending over it in the sink. She routinely changes the direction of her rubbing so as not to injure her wrist.

Even bending over to unload or load a dishwasher can wreak havoc on your back. Kern suggests you bend at the



knees, not your back, when reaching into the dishwasher.

Another technique is to pull a chair or step stool up to the dishwasher and have someone hand you the dirty dishes and retrieve the clean ones.

Rub a dub dub

Washing dishes is just one of many household chores that can result in injuries. Mopping the floor, loading the washing machine and scrubbing the bathtub can all cause musculoskeletal disorders such as back pain, tendonitis and carpal tunnel syndrome.

More than 35 million Americans — 1 in 7 people — suffer from restricted movement due to a musculoskeletal disorder, according to the Bone and Joint Decade, a global, multi-disciplinary initiative targeting the care of people with musculoskeletal conditions.

Musculoskeletal disorders, or MSDs, account for 15 percent of physician visits and 19 percent of hospital stays. Recent studies show homemakers accounted for 15.9 percent of the new cases of carpal tunnel syndrome in 30 states and three Canadian provinces during a 30-month period.

"Injuries from cleaning happen for similar reasons that athletic injuries do. We often have poor posture, do repetitive motions and engage in heavy lifting," Kern said.

The mistake most people make when cleaning is

reaching out and bending over to reach the item they're cleaning, instead of bringing it closer to them. Many people thrust their arm back and forth when vacuuming, rather than simply walking alongside the vacuum cleaner. They will bend over knickknacks on a shelf to dust them, instead of picking these items up and standing straight when dusting them.

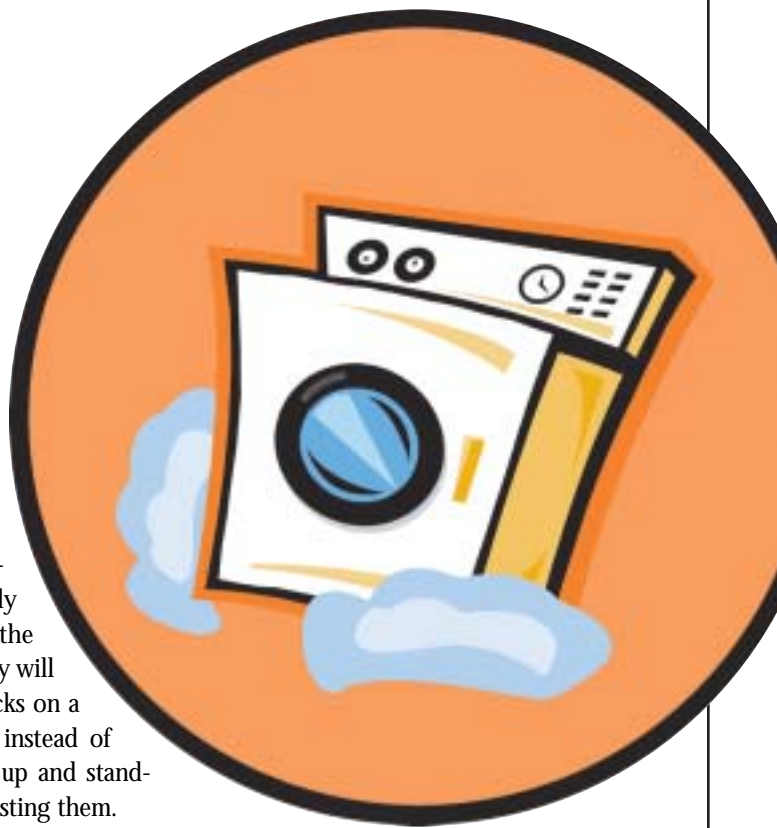
"Anytime you can bring an item closer to you rather than reaching out for it, do it," Kern said.

For example, when scrubbing the bathtub, don't stand on the outside and reach inside, Kern advised. Kneel inside the tub so you're on the same level as the surface you're cleaning, and routinely change the hand you're working with as you scrub.

Other tub tips:

- Use the other hand for support so you don't slip.
- Scrub close to the area where you are kneeling, instead of reaching out with your arm.
- Move around on your knees as you clean the entire tub surface.

When cleaning the toilet, again sit or kneel down so you're close to the



surface you're cleaning, instead of standing up and bending down with your back to reach into the commode. "Obviously if you're getting this close to the toilet, you'll want to clean it more often — perhaps once a week, instead of letting it go for a long time," Kern said, laughing.

You can use the same tips to clean any room in your house. Some of Kern's suggestions for completing some of the more common housecleaning chores safely include:

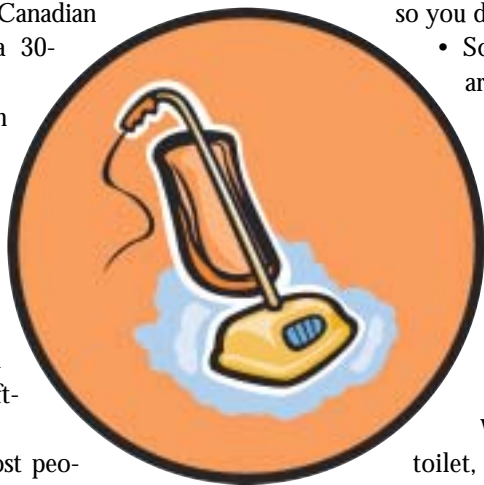
Mopping and vacuuming

Do

- Keep your head up.
- Keep your wrists flat and straight by placing your palm along the side of the mop or vacuum handle.
- Walk with the mop or vacuum, keeping your arm in a neutral position, instead of moving your arm back and forth to clean.

Don't

- Bend your wrist up while holding the



map or vacuum handle. This awkward wrist position may lead to carpal tunnel or tendonitis.

- Thrust your arm out while bending

backward slightly. This puts your back at risk of injury.

- Twist at the waist. This also can injure your back.

Warm up to household chores

You warm up before you play sports and work out; why not warm up before you clean the house? Stretching is especially helpful for middle-aged and senior cleaners.

"As you get older you don't have the same muscle tone as when you're in your 20s and 30s," said Marialice Kern, an associate professor of kinesiology at San Francisco State University. "You can really injure yourself doing housework if you're not in good shape."

If you have a sore back, Kern recommends strengthening your abdominal muscles by doing daily sit-ups, or crunches. "Our back muscles are usually pretty strong since we stand up straight. But you need to have equal strength between your abs and back," she said. "Having strong abs helps you with lifting. If you have weak abs, you can overstrain the back."

If you're feeling stiff, Kern recommends stretching. Start out with a simple stretch; bend over and touch your toes. If you can't reach your toes while standing, do it while sitting in a chair. "When you feel the stretch in the back of your legs, relax, and hold the position until the count of five," Kern said. "Try to remember to breathe; don't hold your breath. Do it again, and you'll be surprised how much farther you can reach."

And for cardiovascular conditioning, nothing beats walking. "Walking is the best cardiovascular exercise for most people. Keep the pace brisk so you break a sweat and find it hard to carry on a conversation," Kern advised. "You don't want to stop at every neighbor's house to chat."

Whatever types of exercises you choose, be sure to start out slowly and increase your workout gradually. Each week add a few more repetitions of your exercise or stretches and walk just a little bit farther. "It's tempting to push yourself in an exercise routine," Kern said. "But if you

start out too quickly you'll tear a muscle and you'll have to start all over again."



Dishwashing

Do

- Place one foot on an elevated surface, such as a step stool.
- Slightly bend the other knee.
- Keep wrists flat and straight.
- Alternate the direction in which you rub the dishes.

Don't

- Keep your knees locked; it's hard on the back.
- Bend at the waist.
- Bend your wrist upward.

Laundry

Do

- Place the basket at the same level of the machine.
- When unloading, lift your opposite leg as the arm that's reaching into the machine.
- Use your other hand for support.

Don't

- Bend at the waist and lift wet objects out of the wash machine by straightening your back.
- Place the laundry basket on the floor and bend or twist at the waist to pick up each item.

Perhaps the most important tip Kern offered is to remain vigilant. Slipping into bad habits is easy when you're doing something as routine as housework.

Even Kern has to remind herself to perform household chores correctly. "Just the other day I was outside mowing the lawn and I caught myself lifting the bag of clippings with my back, rather than with my knees," she said.